Violence and Visibility in Contemporary Syria: An Ethnography of the "Expanded Places"

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Abstract:

This article reflects on the relationship between visibility and violence as redefined by the combined action of warfare and networked communication technologies. Drawing on the author's own ethnography conducted in Syria in 2010, and on anonymous YouTube videos, it introduces the concept of "expanded places" to look at sites that have been physically annihilated; yet, at the same time, they have been re-animated through multiple mediated versions circulating and re-circulating on the networks. Building on Rancière's work on the distribution of the sensible, the article argues that, at the intersection of those simultaneous actions of annihilation and regeneration, a new geography of visibility and violence is being shaped which rearranges the existing into a completely new political form and aesthetic format. Thriving on the techno-human infrastructure of the networks, and relying on the endless proliferation of images resulting from the loss of control of image-makers over their own production, expanded places are aggregators of new communities that add novel layers of signification to the empirical world, and create their own multiple realities and histories.

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Fig. 1. The short film "Images in Spite of All" results from the combination of the author's own video ethnography conducted in 2010 at the Damascene Village within the framework of her Ph.D fieldwork on Syrian TV drama; and of several videos produced by anonymous users and Arab TV channels that were widely shared on the networks between 2012 and 2014. The film can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/133892234

"Is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist,
a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?"
(Clifford, 1988:147)

Introduction

This article reflects on the relationship between visibility and violence as reconfigured and redefined by the combined action of contemporary warfare and networked communication technologies.[1] It focuses on the interweaving of the destruction of places as a result of war, and the ever-circulating images of those very places, which are endlessly reproduced and recreated through and on the networks. I argue that a new understanding of places is being shaped and brought to light at the intersection of these simultaneous actions of annihilation and regeneration.

This novel geography of visibility and violence is defined around sites that have been physically annihilated; yet, at the same time, they are being re-animated through multiple mediated versions circulating and re-circulating on the networks. I introduce the concept of "expanded places" to define these sites that are enjoying a form of mediated after-life despite the fact

that their physical selves have been destroyed. Here "expanding" does not refer to the repetition, recreation, reproduction, and re-circulation of images; nor to the proliferation of the latter if understood as a mere growth in quantitative presence across contexts.

In order to reflect on the characteristics and implications of the process of "expansion" being generated on and through networked communication technologies I build on the conceptual framework developed by Jacques Rancière (2013) on the "distribution of the sensible," which emphasizes the political dimension of aesthetics, and reads the aesthetic dimension as inherently political. I draw on his reflections on the "aesthetic regime" to look at my own ethnography conducted in 2010 at the Damascene Village (*al qariyya al shamiyya*), a theme park located in al Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus. From 2006 to 2010, the site served as a location for the TV series *Bab al hara* (The Gate of the Neighborhood), with its romanticized storyline of the Syrian resistance against French colonial rule in the 1920s; which did in fact start in the al Ghouta district. In 2012, as the Syrian uprising turned into a fully-fledged civil war, the Damascene Village was occupied several times by opposing factions, each of them shooting video accounts narrating the seizure of the theme park using themes, symbols and characters borrowed from the TV series. Eventually the Damascene Village was destroyed; yet, the self-shot videos, once uploaded onto YouTube, continued to fuel the spread of clashing narratives and contradictory understandings of national resistance, which turned a physical site hosting a staged representation of a conflict into a conflict zone itself, endlessly reproduced through social networking sites.

Before being expanded by the combined action of warfare and the networks, the Damascene Village was already a politically charged, symbolic site; as different layers of times and places - the historical al Ghouta of the 1920s anti-colonial struggle - were mass mediated through a fictional representation - the *Bab al hara* TV series - where the actual, physical space had become entangled with its imaginative representations. However, there is something fundamentally new occurring when networked communication

technologies become involved in the process of mediating a space that has been physically destroyed. The aim of this article is precisely to look at the intersection between violence and technology, between annihilation and regeneration, where expanded places are generated; and to explore the new "fictionality" being shaped here, understood as a way of assigning novel meanings to the empirical world, a philosophical device to rearrange the existing into a completely new (political) form and (aesthetic) format (Rancière 2013:33).

My argument is that in order to think of this new form and format of violence and visibility, we have to focus on the techno-social platform triggering the process of expansion of places, that is networked communication technologies, understood both as the multi-layered technical infrastructure of social networking sites mediating signs, spaces, meanings and people; and as the subject of that very mediation, made up of anonymous and unidentified individuals. Using ethnographies of the Damascene Village, studied both as a physical site and as its expanded versions, I will underline how key features of the networks - circulation, reflexivity, anonymity, and decentralized authorship - forge a new relationship between visibility and violence, which, by expanding the former through a never-ending layering and cross-referencing of times and spaces, ceaselessly replicates the latter.

Because of the incessant speed and dissemination made possible by the networks, images of expanded places prove to be extraordinarily resilient. At the same time, they are both the place and the methodological device for violence, if the latter is executed through images. Violence is also inflicted on the image itself, as the dramatic ending of the Damascene Village will reveal.

Prologue: from al Ghouta to *Bab al hara*, turning physical and mediated spaces into expanded places

Al Ghouta (oasis) is an area surrounding Damascus, and was formerly known as the green belt of the Syrian capital. In Syria's collective memory, al Ghouta is the place where the anti-colonial struggle against French

occupation took shape and was organized in the 1920s. The connection between the physical space and its symbolic value in shaping shared ideas of nation, unity, and resistance has been widely celebrated in Syria's cultural production.[2] In the country's collective imagery al Ghouta has become a "place" in Yi Fu Tuan's understanding of the term: something that "feels thoroughly familiar" (Tuan 1977:73).

During the post-independence years, al Ghouta was the favorite venue for picnics and family outings, the ideal place for Damascene families to seek relief from the heat and the hustle and bustle of Syria's capital. However, as a result of the liberalization policies that in the late 1980s considerably expanded commercial ventures in several sectors of the economy previously controlled by the state, al Ghouta was affected by a wave of property development and exposed to a process of uncontrolled urbanization.[3] As part of the transformation of al Ghouta into an urban suburb, a theme park was built to attract further investment to the area, together with a culture of leisure and consumption. Named "the Damascene Village" and located in the Eastern part of al Ghouta, strategically close to the international airport, the entertainment facilities reproduced the stunning beauty of the Old City of Damascus and was home to a number of elegant restaurants, a museum of Damascene folklore, and a zoo.

For five consecutive seasons (2006-2010) the Damascene Village served as the location for *Bab al ḥara*, a Syrian TV series that quickly became one of the highest rated in the history of Arab satellite television.[4] *Bab al ḥara* idealized the daily life and social customs of a Damascene neighborhood at the time of the French mandate, celebrating the people's struggle against colonial rule; which, as said earlier, was organized precisely in al Ghouta, the area where the TV series had been filmed. Therefore, the Damascene Village became a physical replica of the historic 1920s rebel stronghold conceived as a TV set for a reenactment drama of that very struggle; which, historically speaking, took place exactly in the location where the fictional copy had been rebuilt for the sake of media consumption.

In May 2010, in the context of the fieldwork I was conducting for my PhD research on Syrian TV drama, I spent a month in the Damascene Village, embedded with the *Bab al hara* crew. At that time, the physical site of the Damascene Village had been metaphorically turned into *Bab al hara*. Inside the Damascene Village everything, from the architecture of the buildings to the design of the shops and the goods being sold, was the spatial manifestation of a corporate-driven entertainment culture inspired by the Pan-Arab TV series property of a top entertainment group, the Gulf-based, Saudi-owned MBC. The Syrian suburb was occupied, both physically and metaphorically, by pan-Arab capital, which reshaped the symbolic geography of the place, turning it into a mass-mediated reproduction of itself as reenacted in *Bab al hara*.

In November 2010, I took a group of university students and professors on a day trip to the Damascene Village. Everything that happened during the outing was *Bab al hara*-related. We dressed up as its characters; we talked to each other employing its language, making references to its symbolic universe; we even performed sequences from the TV series using them as an access point for discussing contemporary Syria. Our experience was a full embodiment of Jeremy Rifkin's reflection that "theme parks symbolize the primacy of *consumption as formula for organizing social relationships*" (Anton-Clavé 2007:156);[5] and of Guy Debord's understanding of "spectacle" as "a *social relationship between people that is mediated by images*" (Debord 1999:2).[6]

Both domestically and at a pan-Arab level, Bab *al hara* was the perfect media representation of an inclusive national, multicultural project. In fact, the *hara* (neighborhood) portrayed in the series included Muslims and Christians, men and women, all of them united by the common fight against foreign occupation, and struggling to preserve their national unity and a shared identity of *al watan* (the homeland). This message of inclusiveness was in tune with the seemingly reform-minded project backed by president Bashar al Asad and his inner circle of advisors, widely supported by the cultural elites of the country, including the Syrian TV drama makers.[7]

As noted by Lisa Wedeen (2013), TV entertainment, together with other market-oriented languages, had contributed to spreading the fantasy of a multicultural Syria under al Asad's leadership, where consumption, linked to stability and order, could make the "good life" accessible to everybody. The Syria of the 2000s was a fully-fledged "neoliberal autocracy" where aspirations for a good life had become melded to "fantasies of multicultural accommodation, domestic security, and a sovereign national identity" (Wedeen 2013:842-843). *Bab al hara* had rendered this vision into the shiny, corporate-driven language of a blockbuster TV series. Everyone could become part of the Syrian dream, just as everyone potentially belonged to *al wata*n.

However, in March 2011 the Syrian uprising broke out, making *al watan* a very contentious, politically charged issue, and bringing to the surface the contradictions and clashing ideas hidden behind a seemingly inclusive vision of national unity and belonging. One year later, in August 2012, I saw the Damascene Village again, on my computer screen; yet, this time it was not serving as a film location for *Bab al hara*.[8] The place had been occupied by a group of anti-al Asad armed rebels; soon after, it was re-conquered by the Syrian army, then again retaken by opposition forces, who remained there under siege until nothing was left of the former Damascene Village. Video accounts were shot and uploaded to YouTube from both sides, narrating the seizure of the Damascene Village by using themes, symbols and characters borrowed from *Bab al hara*. In some cases, they re-enacted entire sequences from the TV series; a realistic *mise-en-scene* which turned a fictional, romanticized story of unity and resistance against the French occupation into a real-time (and armed) clash between different factions at a time when the uprising was turning into a full-blown civil war.

Syrian and pan-Arab news stations reporting about the events in the Damascene Village edited the YouTube videos taken by the army and the rebels together with archive footage taken from the TV series, using its soundtrack to package their news features. Once again, everything was *Bab al hara*-related. Paradoxically, all the media discourses generated around the clashes in the Damascene Village of the 2010s - including those produced

by non-fiction media - borrowed from the nostalgic, fictitious reproduction of historical events in the Syria of the 1920s. Once circulated online, these media discourses were once again re-manipulated and remixed by anonymous users cross-referencing between the fictional historical Damascus of the 1920s, the real Damascene Village of the 2010s, and the news accounts of the destruction of the latter that eventually became entangled with the narrative universe of *Bab al hara*. This layering of media might be interpreted as a process of "remediation" in Bolter and Grusin's understanding (2000), that is a way of referencing older media and repackaging them in order for new media to achieve its cultural significance.

Yet, there is something fundamentally different in the process of hyper-linking, cross-referencing and generating endless layers of times, spaces and meanings initiated and boosted by any networked content - whether a self-produced video item, or a piece of mainstream television - if uploaded to YouTube and shared across the networks. Jodi Dean (2010) has rightly described the feedback loops and the circuits of drive as the main feature of networked communication technologies. Here the latter is understood as a techno-social infrastructure defined by characteristics of reflexivity and the endless circulation of messages that are shared, manipulated, and repeated over and over again in a loop where any possible meaning is lost. Messages become mere contributions to the ever-circulating flow of data upon which networked communications technologies thrive. The implications of this process in terms of production of meaning are dramatic. According to Dean (2009), the uncontrollable speed and spread of contributions over the networks help prevent the formation of any sort of signification. "Networked communications - particularly in their continued entanglements with the mainstream media - format the terrain of battle between competing conceptions of the Real;" here the latter do not generate a plurality of visions, but a set of "disintegrated spectacles" which undermine any possible condition of belief and generate a feeling of "constituent anxiety" (Dean 2009:173).

This process - which is inherent to the networks - is amplified within highly contentious contexts, such as contemporary Syria, experiencing a violent and bloody armed clash of visions over the country's future. If *Bab al hara*

used to symbolize, at a mass media level, Syrian national unity and a shared idea of *al watan*, the uprising escalated into civil war has turned the TV series into a heavily contentious site. This is apparent from the YouTube videos shot by the Syrian army and the armed rebels.

The Syrian army's video features an unveiled young woman in military fatigues, a TV reporter embedded with the troops whose role is to witness and support the military fight to reconquer the Damascene Village by providing a live account for the wider Syrian audience. This recalls the character of Umm Joseph in *Bab al hara*, an old Christian lady who fights for the independence of her country alongside her male (and Muslim) colleagues, symbolizing the multicultural inclusiveness of the *hara* as a metaphor for the entire country. On the contrary, the rebels' videos feature only men who are mostly bearded; a trait that clearly suggests their religious affiliation. In a fascinating (and surreal) mixture of the real and fictitious, the rebels call themselves *rijal al Ghouta al sharqiyya* (the men of Eastern al Ghouta), borrowing the expression from the TV series; and, at the same time, referring to the real al Ghouta, which stands both as the filming location of *Bab al hara*, and as the area they are conquering while shooting the video. Visually and textually playing with the intertwinement and cross-referencing of places and times, the rebels' videos denounce the siege being imposed by the Syrian army on the al Ghouta of the 2010s, connecting it to the historical siege of that very area carried out by the French troops in 1920s as dramatized and narrated in *Bab al hara*.

These video accounts being circulated on the networks clearly show that the fantasy of inclusiveness behind the *hara* - and behind Bashar al Asad's political project - has now been fragmented into clashing narratives packaged by opposing armed factions that have occupied both the physical space of the Damascene Village, and the symbolic, mediated space of *Bab al hara*. Thus, the Damascene Village has been transformed from a set staging an historical fight fictionalized for the sake of TV drama to a set enabling real armed fighting, used by opposing parties to re-enact *Bab al hara*'s re-enactment of the people's anti-colonial struggle, and to give it novel meanings in the context of the Syrian civil war.

Bab al hara was already a contentious space long before the Syrian conflict broke out. From the time of its first broadcast, back in 2006, the TV series generated several heated debates, mostly on Syrian media. For example, critics had pointed to the inaccurate representation of the women of the *hara*, who were portrayed as passive mothers and wives, subject to their husbands' and fathers' will. Others accused the TV series of ignoring the vibrant cultural life and the high educational level of Damascenes at the time, focusing exclusively on the lower, uneducated class.[9] However, these controversies mostly took place within the space of traditional mainstream media, such as the written press or TV talk shows. Now, the combined action of violence performed in the context of an ongoing civil war and of networked communication technologies has broken up the narrative of a shared nationhood into a variety of competing versions of reality; none of them able to restore the conditions necessary for a belief in a shared national project. A novel space has been created by the entanglement of warfare and technology, where lines are blurred between the physical, lived experiences of war and their media representations, which have gained a new existence by virtue of the endless circulation of the layering of times, spaces, and people enabled by the networks.

This new environment, defined around what I call "expanded places," re-establishes the relationship between violence and visibility, and broadens the very idea of conflict. Here, mediated and symbolic languages are employed to perform and legitimize the violence perpetrated in physical spaces. At the same time, the large scale production and reproduction of this very violence through networked forms and formats serves to actualize and rationalize it, its viral circulation being endlessly nurtured and boosted by the techno-human structure of the networks.

Expanding warfare through the networks: an ethnography of expanded places

Drawing from the ethnographies of the Damascene Village, I want to reflect on the relationship between visibility and violence in the performance of contemporary warfare as defined by and through the networks, and on the

implications of being exposed to violent events in the context of a networked environment. Philosopher Micheal Shapiro (2011) calls this situation of continuous exposure to violence the presence of war. It is by virtue of the "technologies of perception" shaping our communication habitat. He argues that an overlap between the materiality of violence being performed remotely and the comfort of the places where we consume it is produced (Shapiro 2013:137). This reflection is key to approaching expanded places as novel environments generated by the combined action of warfare and networked communication technologies.

Long before new media, scholarship had raised the question of the juxtaposition of conflict zones as places for the production of violence, and comfort zones as environments for the consumption of the latter, emphasizing the role of visual media in bringing together these apparently opposing contexts. Several works have focused on the relationship between violence and visual media, stressing the capacity of the latter to shape a sort of dramaturgy (and ideology) of warfare. Susan Sontag (1977) was the first to underline that the over-saturation of images of violence and violent images had resulted in hindering their potential capacity to generate any sort of ethical responsiveness. Finally, their very existence could not help but bear witness to "the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction" (Sontag 1977:70).

Judith Butler (2009) pushed this reflection farther by arguing that the role of images was not only to document violence, but to actively perform it. This capacity to contribute to the performance of violence is, in her view, closely connected to their rapid spread and dissemination through a diverse set of media. Butler has stressed the importance of media circulation in shaping the relationship between violence and visibility, and has directly linked media representations to modes of military conduct. In her words: "there is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation" (Butler 2009:29).

Yet the role played by networked communication technologies in generating expanded places exceeds that of facilitating the mere circulation and proliferation of visual media, and of producing and reproducing media representations. Here the networks have to be conceived not only as a techno-infrastructure boosting the endless reproduction of images and texts, but also as the human fabric beneath the mechanism of that very reproduction. The web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2004), also defined as participatory web or "social" web, is in fact at the same time the technological infrastructure and the human network connecting people and information in a system of cross-referencing and hyperlinking. Reflexivity and circulation are key features describing this environment of networked data and people, together with anonymity and decentralized authorship.

The combination of the technological and human element defining networked communication technologies generates a fundamental difference with non-networked media, such as photography or television, which were the focus of Sontag and Butler's reflections. By virtue of the networks' techno-human infrastructure, visuals and data are not just copied or disseminated, but hyperlinked and cross-referenced with other visuals and data, and connected to an ever expanding web of people, places, and times. Within this architecture, everybody is a maker of messages and a connector between one message and another; between one node of the web and another. The hyperlinking of people, places, and times is central to the process of expanding places that have been annihilated by violence and warfare, while at the same time being multiplied in endless mediated versions where new spatio-temporal and symbolic connections are established.

The fate of the Damascene Village makes this apparent. Here, different layers of time have overlapped: the historical 1920s; the 1920s as re-imagined by a media product made in the 2000s; the 1920s celebrated in a fictional version of the 2000s and re-employed in the 2010s by opposing factions to fight a real war and endorse their own version of armed resistance. Places have also merged: the historical site of al Ghouta with its physical replica, the Damascene Village; and the fictional representation of al Ghouta offered by *Bab al hara* with the militarized and physically besieged Dama-

scene Village. New meanings have been generated through this melting of times and places, as shown by the self-recorded video accounts produced by the rebels and the Syrian army. Both sides have linked a fantasy of the historical al Ghouta as re-elaborated by *Bab al ḥara* to their own fantasy of conquering Syria's collective imagination through the physical occupation of the TV series location, which is also the material site where the local anti-colonial struggle originated. By re-articulating the links between historical resistance struggles, the fantasy of this very resistance filtered through TV fiction, and their ongoing armed resistance, both the rebels and the loyalist army have been playing with images and signs, cross-cutting times and spaces.

The multi-layered cross-referencing of a plurality of times and spaces is a result of the process of expansion which occurs by virtue of the techno-human infrastructure of networked communication technologies. This spatio-temporal overlap and the blurring of the boundaries between a fictional replica of a physical, historical place, and the latter's material existence, coincide to shape a continuous real-time and live-presence which characterize time and space in expanded places. The YouTube videos that have been uploaded by the armed rebels and the Syrian army, shared by thousands of unknown users worldwide, remixed by Arab TV news stations, re-manipulated by other unknown users who edit them once again and, finally, re-injected into the ever-circulating data stream generated by the networks, have all contributed to the expansion of the place formerly known as the *Damascene Village*. Expanding a place, in fact, does not only mean multiplying its spatio-temporal existence, but also interconnecting it with other places, times, languages, material existences and individualities.

The endless making and remaking of the connections between images and spaces and the continuous attribution of novel meanings to the empirical and symbolic world generate alternative ways of framing the "existing sense of reality," redefining the "trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done" (Rancière 2009:49). Along these lines a new fictionality emerges; which, as conceptualized by philosopher Jacques Rancière (2013), does not refer to the making up of a fictitious universe,

nor does it evoke a relationship of truth and falsehood. As shown by the story of the Damascene Village, the same symbolic and visual reference (*Bab al hara*) can be employed simultaneously by opposing factions (the Syrian army and the armed rebels) to produce contrasting narratives of resistance, and clashing ideas of nationhood. It can both serve to evoke a seemingly inclusive multiculturalism promoted under al Asad's leadership; and, at the same time, to remind us that an entire nation is being besieged, not by occupying foreign forces but by the Syrian regime.

Fictionality has to be understood as the philosophical device rearranging the existing into a completely new (political) form, and (aesthetic) format. I argue that the relationship between the political and the aesthetic being established in expanded places has to be defined along the lines of Rancière's reflection (2013) on the "aesthetic regime," that is a framework organizing the visible, the thinkable and the sayable independently from the logic of causality or representativity characterizing previous forms of "distribution of the sensible." Within the "ethical regime" and the "representative regime" the question of the image was raised in reference to an external principle (Rancière 2013:16-17); whether ethical (that is "truth content" of the image, its "end or purpose") or representative (i.e., its ability to imitate in a "good or bad, adequate or inadequate" way). Images have been assessed and judged within the ethical and the representative regimes around a principle of truthfulness, or of representation. In the former, images have to aim at something, have to move and mobilize: in the latter, they have to describe "proper ways of doing and making" according to a criterion of representation or mimesis (Rancière 2013:17).

However, the logic of expanded places does not respond to any of these criteria. The fictionality specific to the aesthetic regime is, in fact, a framework marked by a "proliferation of modes of speech and levels of meaning" (Rancière 2013:33) where temporality is defined around a "co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities" (Rancière 2013:21) - as we have witnessed with the continuous layering of times and places in the Damascene Village. In the context of Rancière's aesthetic regime the logic of facts and the logic of fiction are blurred, as much as in expanded places like the Damascene Village.

This seems to bear a resemblance to Jean Baudrillard's *hyperreal* (1994) defined as a space "whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of the truth" (Poster 2001:170). The proliferation of mediated languages which shaped Baudrillard's understanding of "simulation" (1994) as the main process describing the hyperreal could evoke the layering of forms and formats that have entangled the real Damascene Village with its representations through *Bab al hara*, re-connecting it again to the historical al Ghouta. However, while Baudrillard's simulation is a mediated process which "bears no relation to any reality," expanded places are shaped around the networked re-elaboration, re-imagination, and re-manipulation of materialities, physical places, and historical events (Poster 2001:173). Both the Damascene Village and *Bab al hara* are mediated embodiments of the fantasy of national unity and resistance historically and symbolically represented by al Ghouta. The expanded versions of the Damascene Village generated through networked communication technologies also bear reference to the events happening on the ground in contemporary Syria (the siege of al Ghouta carried out by the Syrian army), re-connecting them to an historical event that occurred in another time (the siege of al Ghouta carried out during the French colonial mandate) which occupies a strong symbolic place in the country's collective imagination.

All the expanded versions of the Damascene Village bear a connection to other times and spaces, a connection which is used by each faction to support its own version of reality. Yet, what we should focus on is not this relation to a supposed ontological reality lying beneath expanded places; but rather the process by which the networks add new layers to the existing sense of reality, and how this results in creating new "communities of sense" (Rancière 2009). The story of the Damascene Village proves that it does not really matter whether the fantasy of al Ghouta elaborated by *Bab al hara* corresponds to an historical reality; what it is important to reflect upon is that this very fantasy has been used to generate and reproduce violence from opposite armed factions, both of which have employed mediated and networked languages to claim legitimacy over their own idea of homeland and national resistance.

In this context "the Aristotelian dividing line between two 'stories' or 'histories' - poets' stories and the history of historians - is thereby revoked, the dividing line that not only separated reality and fiction but also empirical succession and constructed necessity (...) Testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning" (Rancière 2013:33-34). Therefore, instead of looking at the questions generated by expanded spaces in relation to an adherence to reality and truth, or in connection with an idea of representation, I suggest focusing on the way new meanings, novel political forms, and aesthetic formats emerge within these environment by virtue of the process of cross-referencing and hyperlinking boosted by the networks. This constitutes a major shift from Sontag and Butler's reflections on violence and visibility elaborated in the context of non-networked media. Both scholars had evoked either an ethical or a representative function of the images which, within the networked environment connecting people and data defining expanded places, is replaced by a logic where "descriptive and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangements used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world" (Rancière 2013:33).

Defining new forms and formats in expanded places

Novel political forms and aesthetic formats appear in the context of networked communication technologies that define expanded places around a new idea of realism. I argue that these forms and formats are fundamentally different from those shaped by non-networked media. Departing from critical theories of realism developed in cinema studies - such as Andre Bazin's idea that the real should be "aimed at" (Deleuze 1989:1) - and from the "ideology of realism" put forward by television - directly linked "to the possibility of 'live'" broadcast (Zimmer 2015:84) - I propose looking at these new forms and formats in light of the characteristics of circularity, reflexivity, anonymity and decentralized authorship which, as previously underlined, describe the networks as a techno-human infrastructure.

Reflecting on the distribution of the sensible and on the different organizational forms it generates, Rancière has emphasized the role that "mechan-

ical arts" played in shaping a new aesthetic, and therefore political, format (Rancière 2013:27). Here technology is not understood as a mere technique of reproduction and transmission; rather, it is the platform that allows a fundamental shift introduced within the aesthetic regime (i.e., "the honor acquired by the commonplace") to emerge and be visualized (Rancière 2013:29). In Rancière's view, the aesthetic revolution - another way of saying modernity - has broken with a certain relation to the image established within the ethical and representative regimes; revoking, on the one hand, "the representative tradition's scales of grandeur," and, on the other hand, "the oratorical model of speech in favor of the interpretation of signs" (Rancière 2013:30).

The combination of an aesthetic shift with the technological possibility of focusing on "the anonymous" and on the "minute details of ordinary life" has given rise a new understanding of history as a continuous process of assigning meanings to material realities, of connecting signs and symbols in unprecedented ways. In this sense we can define history as a "new form of fiction,"[10] and look at reality as capable of "bearing greater fictional invention" by virtue of the never-ending connections between times, places, and people, being continuously made and remade, done and undone (Rancière 2013:34). According to Rancière, documentary films, because of their inner aspiration to capture reality, have a greater chance of rendering the blurring of lines between different material realities and their representations which defines the aesthetic regime.

The French philosopher does not explicitly mention networked communication technologies. However, his emphasis on the anonymous subject as an active producer of history understood in terms of fictionality bears more than a resemblance to the "prosumer" of the networked age.[11] In places that have been expanded by the combined action of warfare and technology everyone can participate in the task of producing and reproducing history, as we have seen in the Damascene Village, where the rebels, the Syrian army, pan-Arab news channels, and thousands of unknown users have all contributed to remaking the connection between the historical al Ghouta and the actual besieged al Ghouta, between *Bab al ḥara* and their own fantasy of national resistance.

The peculiarity of such new formats as the YouTube videos disseminated virally over the web 2.0 is that they combine a visual culture of "compulsive documentation films" packaged to signify the quintessential form of "experience;" with "the diffuse dispersal of information" of the networked experience (Zimmer 2015:97). As argued by Catherine Zimmer (2015:97), "self experience should be exchanged and circulated in order to become relevant. In other words, subjectivity and mediated representation are one and the same," as they are both determined by the techno-human infrastructure of the networks where these formats are produced and circulated. Once again, a technological possibility helps render a fundamental aesthetic - and political - shift, that is the rise of the anonymous subject and decentralized authorship nurtured by virtue of the circularity and reflexivity of the networks. At the same time, serving as a distribution platform, networked communication technologies boost the production of content, which is then re-injected into the networks in an endless cycle of circulation.

Therefore, the new formats of realism shaped on the networks result from "ever-accumulating layers of technological mediation;" they are defined, as Zimmer (2015:112-113) underlines, by "a reflexive structure that makes explicit reference to the manner in which any event or understanding of an event is multiply mediated." The story of the Damascene Village clearly evokes this process of connecting layers of networked times, places, and people; and creating a new understanding of reality which contains all those apparently contradictory strata in a sort of continuous real-time presence. While producing the personal and the individual, at the same time the video accounts shot by the Syrian army and the armed rebels are networked multilayered formations that become "increasingly indistinguishable in aesthetic and function from the social spectacle, the virtual assemblage, and the hypermediation of networked communication" (Zimmer 2015:112).

By virtue of their networked genealogy the formats generated within expanded places shape a fluctuating understanding of reality and history, as they continuously rearrange links between signs and images; being influenced by the circularity, reflexivity, anonymity, and decentralized author-

ship of the networks as they do so. Throughout this process they "reconfigure the map of the sensible;" through the modeling of new perceptions, trajectories and meanings they come to produce new political forms (Rancière 2013:35). A new aesthetic order *à la* Rancière generates "uncertain communities" politically questioning "the distribution of roles, territories, and languages" (Rancière 2013:36). Yet, in expanded places that have been destroyed by violence and warfare, then have been re-born through a networked after-life, this process goes much further. Here, challenging the distribution of the sensible is not only a matter of contentious politics, but of generating and regenerating violence and destruction through the endless circulation of formats of violence boosted by the inner techno-human structure of the networks.

Epilogue: resilience of the image in expanded places

A paradox within expanded places is that, after having been physically annihilated, they are regenerated through their own images which, once injected onto the networks and hyperlinked to other images, times, and spaces, grant to their destroyed selves an endless, networked after-life. In fact, images lie at the core of the process of life-extension. Expanded places are image-fed, growing around the proliferation of the networked forms and formats previously described.

The networks, conceived as the techno-human infrastructure enabling expansion by virtue of its circularity, reflexivity, anonymity, and decentralized authorship, bear another structural characteristic that contributes to strengthening the proliferation of images in expanded places, which is the diffused ownership of the information circulating through networked communication technologies. Having inserted images in the data stream image-makers lose control - and ownership - of their own visual production. This is apparent in the case of the Damascene Village; even in the presence of a mainstream corporate product such as *Bab al hara*, whose ownership is protected by copyrights, its circulation on the networks produces a de facto loss of control over it, resulting in indiscriminate viral sharing and manipulation by anonymous users, other satellite networks, and armed groups like the Syrian army and the rebels.

The loss of ownership over content, which has been widely celebrated by the cultures of sharing and remixing, was already observed in the 1970s by Jean Luc Godard.[12] "Poor revolutionary fools, millionaires of images of revolution," remarked the French filmmaker in his documentary film on the (failed) Palestinian uprising, *Ici et ailleurs* ("Here and elsewhere," 1976). Those Palestinians who had generated thousands of images that were supposed to celebrate the victory of their revolution had actually lost control of those very images; which then could serve to tell multiple, contradictory stories. The condition of being image-makers who are no longer image-keepers is the link connecting a documentary film from the 1970s and the over-mediated and networked environment where expanded places proliferate.

However, it is precisely because of the content producers' failure to preserve their own production that places such as the Damascene Village are granted a further life and can endlessly proliferate and hyperlink with other images within the techno-human infrastructure of the networks. The process of expansion of places relies precisely on this split between image-makers and image-keepers. Images should be left free to circulate in order to nurture the endless data flow upon which networked communications technologies prosper; they should escape from their makers for the sake of being injected into the ever-circulating stream of networked forms and formats. Because of this, a superabundance of images populates expanded places, images that are extremely resilient, and become even more so by virtue of the speed and the dissemination of other data hyperlinked to them in a non-stop flow. Here, images have a dual nature; they are, on the one hand, the methodological device for the performance of violence and, on the other hand, the object of this very violence.

The scholarship has widely reflected on visual media as a tool and technique for executing violence. Analyzing visuals from Abu Ghraib, Catherine Zimmer (2015:44) concluded that torture was not only documented but "performed *through* the act of photography." Summing up a decade and more "politically and culturally saturated by the 'war on terror'," she remarked that this "state of exception" had served as a perfect ideological

context for torture-based media production (Zimmer 2015:53-55). However, violence can be performed on violent images themselves, as the ending of the Damascene Village suggests.

In August 2013, a chemical attack was launched on the area of al Ghouta. It resulted in further deaths, destruction and starvation within the district. Because of the dramatic shortage of food, a *fatwa* was issued allowing people to eat animals not usually consumed. There was a lion in the zoo at the Damascene Village. The Arabic word for lion is *asad*; therefore, in a highly symbolic act, the anti- al Asad rebels under siege killed the lion and ate its meat. A video was shot documenting the entire process, with the purpose of sharing it online. However, shortly after being uploaded, the footage was removed by YouTube, which claimed that it violated the company's community guidelines.

Only a snapshot from the rebels' video has been saved, and it is still circulating (at the time of writing) on the networks. Other images from the video have been sentenced to death by the networks, and condemned to eternal oblivion. Another type of violence has been inflicted on violent images by the networks acting upon a double-edged logic. On the one hand, the technological infrastructure beneath networked communication technologies, functioning around reflexivity and circulation, boosts the expansion of places that have been physically destroyed, regenerating them, and granting them a form of survival after annihilation. On the other hand, that very infrastructure that nurtures "communicative capitalism" (Dean 2009) condemns all things produced to comply with disciplinary frameworks that have been elaborated by private companies and corporate capital.

Hence, those producing violence are also submitted to violence; this operation is much more nuanced and almost imperceptible, as it is perpetrated by the networks adhering to a corporate principle that establishes what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. Contemporary image-keepers are no longer that generation of filmmakers who used to reflect critically on the question of image. The networks have become today's image-keepers; they store and preserve, or delete and destroy images following a logic that still is to be fully explored, understood, and critiqued.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on the increasing role played by networked communication technologies in shaping and re-designing the spatiality and perception of contemporary warfare, and the latter's relationship to visibility and the production of visual economies. Drawing on ethnographies from the Syrian Damascene Village, it has argued that the combined action of violence and visibility, warfare and networked communication technologies produces what I have described as expanded places. Expanded places are endless networked versions of physical sites that have been destroyed, and then regenerated through the multiplication of mediated forms and formats enabled by networked communications technologies. They thrive on the latter's techno-human infrastructure, and rely on the endless proliferation of images occurring as a result of the loss of control of image-makers over their own production. Expanded places are aggregators of new communities of meaning; they are able to catalyze the formation of new meanings and identities, and add novel layers of signification to an existing reality, creating their own multiple realities and histories.

The ethnography that I have conducted on the Damascene Village, with the help of several videos produced and uploaded by multiple subjects (some of them identifiable, others anonymous), constitutes a first case study aiming at discussing the characteristics of expanded places, and at opening up a reflection on multiple spaces generated by the intertwinement of warfare and technology. The article has looked at the prominent role that images play in shaping the expanded places; how they inhabit them; and how they help create new connections between signs and spaces, granting new life to these expanded spaces and catalyzing new communities of sense around them.

The sad ending of the Damascene Village has added another layer for further reflection, which relates to the ownership and control over the images within the networks. The latter not only generate new layers of signification and meanings to an existing reality; they also establish rules, codes of conduct, and a politics to govern and manage expanded places. The disappeared footage of the lion killed in the Damascene Village should stand as

a reminder that the process of expansion and multiplication of mediated languages around a place could be blocked at any moment; and that there is a politics - and a political economy - behind even such seemingly ethereal places, which calls for further investigation.

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Notes

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[2] Such as the literary production by Badawi al Jabal (a pen name of Mohammed Sulayman al Ahmed), a Syrian poet and anti-colonial political activist.

[3] For further reading on neoliberal reforms in Syria, see Haddad, Bassam (2012) Business networks in Syria. The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience. Stanford: Stanford University Press

[4] For further reading on *Bab al hara* and entertainment television in the Arab world, see Khalil, Joe F., and Marwan M. Kraidy (2009). Arab Television Industries. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶ Emphasis added.

⁷ For further reading on *Bab al ḥara*, and on the political economy of Syrian TV drama in-dustry, see Della Ratta (2013) Dramas of the Authoritarian State. The Politics of Syrian TV Drama in the Pan Arab Market. Ph.D dissertation, Department of Cross Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen.

⁸ The fifth season of *Bab al ḥara* was aired in Ramadan 2010. The TV series restarted several years later; a sixth and seventh seasons were broadcast in Ramadan 2014 and 2015.

⁹ For further reading see Della Ratta (2013) Dramas of the Authoritarian State. The Politics of Syrian TV Drama in the Pan Arab Market. Ph.D dissertation, Department of Cross Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen.

¹⁰ The provocatory title of Rancière's essay (2013) is: "Is History a Form of Fiction?"

¹¹ This definition was coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 when he predicted that, with advanced technologies, the role of producers and consumers would merge.

¹² For further reading on the cultures of sharing, see Lessig, Lawrence (2008) Remix. Mak-ing Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy. London: The Penguin Press.